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ABSTRACT

Powerful economic, social, and political forces are reshaping schools as well as the perceptions of legislators, government officials, school boards, administrators, teachers, businesses, and parents regarding the kinds of pupil services that are needed in schools. At the national level the trend toward shifting decision-making power away from the federal level to the state, and then to county and local decision making bodies frees local decision-makers of federal reporting and oversight requirements, but brings with it less federal revenue. To try to meet current and anticipated needs on what are often stagnant or decreasing budgets, school boards and administrators have begun to adopt cost-cutting, bottom-line oriented approaches to service delivery. The relative health of some psychological service units appears to be a function primarily of difficult to replicate community-specific factors, and long-standing legislative and legal factors. The protections afforded by state legislation no longer appear to be as ironclad as they once were. Four categories of activity that can help psychologists position themselves for survival in this changing practice landscape are: (1) seek continual improvement in the science and practice of psychology; (2) expand competencies to meet school needs of today and tomorrow; (3) engage in legislative, legal, and regulatory advocacy; and (4) engage in educational advocacy to establish connections with local community decision-making bodies. (JBJ)

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Chapter Sixteen

Making Psychologists Indispensable in Schools: Do We Really Have To?

Tom Kubiszyn

My position as Assistant Executive Director for Practice and Director of the Office of Policy and Advocacy in the Schools for the American Psychological Association (APA) affords me the unique opportunity to hear what psychologists interested in school practice across the country have to say about the vitality of psychological services delivery in the schools. And they do have a lot to say! The following responses illustrate the breadth of opinion voiced by psychologists to the question, "What do you think needs to be done to make psychologists indispensable in the schools?"

> "Psychologists need to be made indispensable in the schools before it is too late."
>
> "Psychologists already are indispensable in the schools, but by asking this question you are suggesting they may not be. So stop asking it!."
>
> "It is too late to make psychologists indispensable in the schools, we are just waiting for the shoe to drop."

In concert with these widely varied opinions, a wide variety of staffing and service delivery trends are evident across the country. In some areas, the status quo has been maintained, with services delivered only to special education referred children, and at staffing and service levels comparable to those of a decade or more ago. Elsewhere, staff positions have been cut, with mandated special education services increasingly provided by lesser trained and/or contractual providers. In yet other areas, prevention, diagnostic, and intervention services are being provided to both regular and special education students, and psychological service delivery staffs are expanding, with increasing numbers of doctoral level providers. With such a diversity in staffing and service delivery across the country, it is not surprising that individual psychologists vary widely when asked what needs to be done to make psychologists indispensable in the schools.

One of my responsibilities at the APA is to "keep my finger on the pulse" of professional psychology practice, particularly in the schools. In addition, broader state, regional, and national trends are monitored within the economic, political, and social realms to assess their potential for impact on psychological practice in the schools. These data are shared with APA central office staff and APA leadership to develop policy and advocacy initiatives to help protect and promote the practice of psychology in the schools and school-related settings.

To carry out this function, input must be obtained from practitioners. It must then be organized and integrated with data acquired from

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other sources regarding relevant issues and trends. Finally, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are shared with the membership. In the remainder of this chapter, I will share what I have learned about the viability of psychological services in the schools, reconcile an apparent paradox, and attempt to convince the reader that activities that can help make psychologists indispensable in the schools are both needed and timely. Finally, I will describe what I believe some of those activities should be.

A Confluence of Forces

Powerful economic, social, and political forces are reshaping the schools and the perceptions of legislators, government officials, school boards, administrators, teachers, businesses, and parents about the kinds of pupil services that are needed in the schools (Carlson, Tharinger, Bricklin, DeMers, & Paavola, 1996; Talley & Short, 1996; Tharinger et al., 1996). Examples of some of these forces at both the national and local levels will be discussed next.

National Trends. At the national level, the trend toward devolution—the shifting of decision-making power away from the national or federal level to state, and then to county and local decision-making bodies—portends changes that may be unprecedented in terms of the potential breadth and depth of their effects. Under devolution, localities are increasingly being allowed, through various waivers and block grants, to utilize federal revenue and establish policy in ways they believe to be most beneficial at the local or state level without federal oversight.

Under devolution, localities may no longer be required to follow federal mandates for services or account to federal agencies for expenditures. Localities may welcome a lessening of bureaucratic requirements and increased local decision-making control, but this freedom is not without cost. At each devolutionary level, federal, state, county, and local, a percentage of the federal funds (which may vary between two and five percent) is retained by each administrative body for expenses. This is referred to as a "hold-back." Thus, by the time the federal dollar reaches the local level, it may be worth only 75 or 85 cents.

In short, while devolution frees local decision-makers of federal reporting and oversight requirements, it brings with it less federal revenue. Thus, maintenance of services at predevolution levels becomes a challenge. Since federal dollars, on average, amount to less than ten percent of a district's budget, devolutionary hold-backs may reduce the district's overall budget by "only" one to two percent. While a reduction of this size may appear inconsequential, it should be recalled that cuts often are made in support services before they are made in direct instruction, athletics, band, or other areas. Thus, pupil services would suffer disproportionately from reductions due to devolutionary hold-backs. To the degree that psychologists are viewed as indispensable in the schools, they are less likely to suffer from these cuts.

Local Trends. To try to meet current and anticipated needs on what are often stagnant or decreasing budgets, school boards and administrators have begun to adopt cost-cutting, bottom-line oriented approaches to service delivery. Professional and nonprofessional staff alike are learning that in today's cost-conscious educational environment expectations for annual salary increases, reductions in pupil-teacher ratios, and even long-term job security are no longer as viable as they recently were. Like their counterparts in the business world, psychologists in the schools increasingly must face the specter of "downsizing" (e.g., nonrenewal of contracts, increases in pupil-school psychologist ratios) and "outsourcing" (e.g., privatization and contractual services). In general, as school budgets are stretched to accommodate the increasing needs of many of today's students, "do more with less" has become the "standard operating procedure" in

many districts.

Furthermore, school boards are required to allocate funds from limited budgets to priorities beyond instructional and pupil services. In urban areas in particular, violence as well as renovation and replacement of decaying physical plants increasingly are issues. Floating bond issues to cover physical plant replacement tends to be more difficult in such areas than in suburban areas with stable, if not expanding tax bases. Thus, monies need to come from somewhere. To what will school boards allocate limited funds? To repair or replace crumbling walls and restrooms, leaking roofs, and broken windows? To install various security devices? Or, to hire or grant salary increases to instructional and pupil services personnel?

In addition, questions regarding the necessity, value and appropriateness of various specialty practices and practitioners in the schools, such as psychologists, are being raised around the country. Decision-makers are being lobbied by various groups with agendas that are potentially damaging to psychologists in the schools. These range from groups that believe all psychological services in the schools should be eliminated because they are viewed as intrusive, satanic, damaging, superfluous, or too expensive, to groups of nonpsychological practitioners who claim they can perform competently the duties previously performed by psychologists, and at less cost. Faced with a shrinking dollar, and political and economic pressures to eliminate or at least deliver more cost-effective mental health services, what would you do about psychological services if you were on your local school board? In today's competitive, cost-conscious environment, psychologists will be retained in the schools only if decision-makers are convinced they are indispensable. That is, decision-makers must be persuaded that what psychologists have to offer is unique, needed, and cost-effective. Perhaps this is what the first psychologist meant when she said we must become "indispensable before it is too late."

A Seeming Paradox

In spite of the national and local trends outlined above, traditional special education-linked school psychological services have remained robust in many districts, and broader-based psychological services programs have even expanded in others. Thus, it is not surprising that some psychologists respond with disbelief when they hear pessimistic projections about the future of psychological services in the schools, and with disdain, resistance or hostility when called on to contribute their time, energy, or funds to help ensure the field's future. Given the disturbing national and local trends described above, the existence of robust psychological services units in the schools seems to be a paradox.

Perhaps this is because, as some assert, psychological services in the schools are already viewed as indispensable in these districts. If this assertion is accurate, then all we should have to do is emulate the most successful psychological services units to ensure our future indispensability. Perhaps this is what the second psychologist meant when he said "psychologists already are indispensable." I wish that this were reality. From my view, however, the relative health of some psychological service units appears instead to be a function primarily of difficult to replicate community-specific factors, and longstanding legislative and legal factors. These are reviewed next.

Community-specific Factors. The most successful school psychological services units typically are characterized by competent and innovative psychological services staff. However, this alone does not explain fully their success. They also tend to be located in districts and communities that have some combination of a strong or expanding tax base, administrators adept at garnering support for bond elections and

innovative programs, generous parents and businesses with "deep pockets," staff skilled at obtaining grant funding from foundations and businesses, and staff knowledgeable about obtaining reimbursement for psychological services from Medicaid and other third party payers. Obviously, these conditions exist only in some districts. In most districts the picture is much less positive. Nonetheless, if these factors are present in a district, or can be cultivated, they should be capitalized on because they can surely help psychologists strengthen their positions in schools.

Legislative and Legal Factors. More generally, traditional special education-linked school psychological services units have remained viable because of the legislative protection afforded by federal and state special education categorical service and funding mandates. Interestingly, at the federal level, the special education enabling language of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) does not offer explicit protection for psychologists categorically funded to work with the special education population. IDEA does not require a psychological evaluation to be a part of each special education comprehensive evaluation, and does not require that a psychologist be part of the special education decision-making team. However, specific protections for psychologists have been included in IDEA-related state legislative and regulatory language. This language often requires a psychological assessment to be part of comprehensive evaluations and participation by a psychologist on the special education team.

Thus, the passage of IDEA-related state legislation has been both a boon and a bane for psychologists in the schools. Undeniably, such legislation has created significant employment opportunities for psychologists, and has increased the access of special education referred students to psychological services. As several recent surveys (Reschly& Wilson, 1992; Smith, 1984; Smith & Mealey, 1988) have demonstrated, however, such legislation also has been associated with a stable, but limited service delivery spectrum (i.e., assessment-related activities, and, less frequently, consultation and intervention) to a single category of student. Thus, IDEA-related legislation stimulated employment growth in school psychology while simultaneously limiting roles. As a result, categorically funded psychologists in the schools have not been able, typically, to demonstrate the full range of their competencies with the entire population of students. Arguably, then, it is IDEA-related state legislation, rather than a valuing of the contributions of psychology, or psychology's integration in the mainstream school population, which is the main reason school psychological services units are in as good of condition as they are today.

The Winds of Change

The protections afforded by state legislation no longer appear to be as ironclad as they once were. In New York State, for example, a budget bill introduced by Governor Pataki in January 1996 proposed to reduce special education expenditures by eliminating the existing requirement for a psychological evaluation to be part of the initial comprehensive special education evaluation, and eliminating psychologists as required members of the special education admission, review and dismissal committee. The status of this legislation was unknown at the time this chapter was written, but "the handwriting is on the wall." In these budget conscious times, similar legislation may be expected in other states. Indeed, several states have applied for waivers that would relieve them of the responsibility of complying with various IDEA mandates. Similar initiatives may be expected elsewhere because issues such as quality of care, while important to decision-makers, pale in comparison to the cost-cutting and political forces driving today's school budgetary decisions.

This may be what the third psychologist meant when she said she was "waiting for the shoe to drop."

The deleterious effects of cost-cutting as the dominant factor in mental health decision-making have already been seen in private sector psychological services. Practices that may be appropriate to contain costs in typical business settings have been employed to private sector mental health care on a wholesale basis. The result has been a reduction in rising health care costs, but also an erosion of patient confidentiality, provider autonomy, and the overall quality of mental health care. Clinical decision-making has shifted from providers and patients to anonymous case managers who sometimes are awarded incentives for denying care. A similar mentality may be gaining strength within the educational decision-making arena. In fact, inroads already have been made in districts that have begun billing third party payers, such as Medicaid managed care organizations, for pupil services to lighten the burden on strained education budgets.

What Can We Do to Survive and Become Indispensable?

Adopting coping strategies that have proven ineffective in the private sector will not help. These include denial of the seriousness of the threat, adopting an attitude of "This too shall pass," or engaging in internecine warfare within the field. To do so will only distract us, or lead us to sit idly by and watch what happened in the private sector reinvent itself in the public schools. We can learn from the experiences of our private sector colleagues. We can ensure that we grasp fully the profound implications of the sweeping national, state, and local political and economic trends that are driving change in psychological service delivery in the schools. We can recognize that fighting among ourselves benefits most those who would prefer to see psychologists eliminated from the schools. We can acknowledge that the forces of change provide us with the need and the opportunity to alter and revitalize the way psychological services are delivered in the schools. In the remainder of this chapter, I will describe briefly four categories of activity that can help psychologists position themselves for survival in this changing practice landscape:

(a) seek continual improvement in the science and practice of psychology;
(b) expand our competencies to meet school needs of today and tomorrow;
(c) engage in legislative, legal, and regulatory advocacy; and
(d) engage in educational advocacy to establish connections with local community decision-making bodies.

Continual Improvement in Science/Practice. Continual improvement in science-based service delivery (i.e., whenever possible utilizing objective, data-based approaches to improve cost-effectiveness and clinical efficacy in dealing with diverse populations, problems, and settings) is the foundation on which any effort to make psychology indispensable in the schools rests. Without this commitment, we will become stagnant, possibly ineffective, and indistinguishable from other, often less expensive (and therefore more attractive!) mental health providers. Unless continually improved and expanded upon, our science-based skills will soon be claimed and used by other mental health professionals without scientific training and skill (e.g., psychiatrists and others who may not possess appropriate training performing psychological assessments). Thus, maintaining a strong scientist/practitioner bias is fundamental to the survival of psychologists in the schools.

Expand Competencies. We must also expand our competencies to meet extant and expected needs. Today's schools are expected to provide a wide array of services to an ever increasing

diversity of students. Limiting ourselves to working with only the special education referred population may make our lives simpler, but also isolates us from the "mainstream" of service needs and opportunities in today's schools. If we want to become indispensable, we are more likely to be viewed as such if 100% rather than less than 20% of the school knows about us, and the breadth of services we can provide.

Developing competencies needed to deliver prevention, diagnostic, intervention, and program evaluation services to help schools cope with violence; diversity; teen pregnancy; teen parenthood; sexually-transmitted diseases; teenage drinking; smoking and other forms of substance abuse; increased use of psychopharmacological agents that affect learning, cognition, emotion, and behavior; divorce; manmade and meteorological disasters; and other contemporary issues will make us more valuable to the schools. Also, greater involvement in alternatives to traditional service delivery settings and models that enable us to reach the entire school population will need to be pursued, such as school-based health (Bricklin et al., 1995) and mental health centers (Weist, in press).

The downside of broadening the competency base is that added time and money must be spent in continuing education and obtaining the supervised experience necessary to ensure competency in dealing with a wider range of issues, settings, and individuals. Furthermore, psychologists employed in categorically funded programs may be discouraged or prohibited from providing services to a wider range of students. Thus, if such services are to be provided, it may need to be on a pro-bono basis. The upside of broadening the competency base is visibility and integration with the school's mainstream students and teachers, a step toward indispensability, and a more diverse, challenging, and potentially rewarding practice.

Legislative, Legal, and Regulatory Advocacy. We also must engage in ongoing legislative, legal and regulatory advocacy at both the federal and state levels to ensure that existing statutory and regulatory protections for psychological services in the schools are maintained, strengthened, and expanded. One aspect of such advocacy involves the contribution of personal time. This may involve something as minimal as writing a letter, sending a fax, or making a telephone call when called on by your local, state or national psychological association. Or, it may involve other activities, from testifying about the value of psychological services before legislative bodies, to an ongoing commitment to develop a relationship with a state or federal legislator.

As distasteful as it is to some, financially supporting state and national political action organizations also are vital components of such advocacy efforts. However, it also is the case that less than 10% of psychologists, even those in the ravaged private practice sector, typically contribute. Reasons for not contributing vary, but tend to focus on themes of the inappropriateness of such efforts to influence the political process, and the added expense. In today's political and economic environment, however, failure to be financially present at various political "tables" at the state and national levels only ensures one's irrelevance at decision-making time. Thus, political financial giving is an integral component of legislative, legal, and regulatory advocacy.

Educational Advocacy to Establish Local Community Connections. We also must ensure that we are "at the table" when local decisions about psychological services in the schools are made. There are two ways to do this. One is to be physically present at the decision-making table, but this is not always possible. The other is to be present, and understood, in the minds of those decision-makers who are actually at the table. Failure to be present in either way at the local decision-making table opens the door to those who would further their own political or economic

agendas by restricting or eliminating access of children to needed psychological services. But who are the decision-makers we should be "at the table" with?

They are legion. School board members, administrators, pupil services personnel, third party payers, local business leaders, parents, parent-teacher associations, teacher unions, students and their siblings, and local and state governmental agencies. All these individuals and groups, directly or indirectly, are worthwhile targets for educational advocacy. When was the last time you invited a school board member, business leader, or teacher out to lunch to describe how psychologists working in schools can make their lives better or easier? When was the last time you offered to present a message about the value of psychology in the schools to the school board, chamber of commerce, businesses, or community organizations? When was the last time youoffered your skills in process consultation, team building, or problem solving to local or state governmental agencies? Granted, not everyone will be interested in your offer, but some will be.

What is more important than the content, style, or efficacy of your involvement in establishing connections in your community is that you are actively engaged in both building visibility for your profession, and educating others about what it is we do. It is your identification as a psychologist, and your display of interest in the group whose meeting you are attending that will, with repetition, help bring psychology "to the table." Establishing visibility in this way makes it less likely that when the budget ax falls, it falls in a way that is harmful to psychology in the schools. It is much easier for community decision-makers to make cuts in programs that are silent or confusing than to make cuts in programs that are actively part of the community, and are clear, and ongoing in their educational advocacy. Educational advocacy also makes it more likely that decision-makers will call on you or other psychologists for clarification when attacks against psychology are launched by opponents driven by political and economic agendas.

What is being proposed may sound like a lot of work. It is. It may also sound like there is little to no immediate financial payoff for the effort expended. This is correct. This kind of advocacy is best viewed as an investment. The time and effort put in today may not be worth much tomorrow, or the next day. By making regular, timely contributions to the development of community connections a substantial nest egg of visibility, integration, and political goodwill will be accumulated that may pay off over the long term, although there can be no guarantees.

Summary

While psychological services units in some school districts remain robust, powerful forces of change threaten psychology's viability in the schools. In the face of these powerful forces we must not fall into the trap of denying, naively accepting, or blaming our psychologist colleagues for the way things are. Rather than allowing ourselves to be victimized by those who stand to gain political and economic advantages by eliminating psychology from the schools, we can assertively strive to take the actions necessary to ensure psychology's survival, and strive toward developing indispensability for psychologists in the schools. We can do so by strengthening our commitment to science-based practice, expanding our competencies to provide broader services to the entire school population, and engaging in legislative, legal, and regulatory advocacy. Finally, we can actively pursue a course of educational advocacy within our communities with anyone who may potentially have influence over decisions made at the local, community level. Whatever the outcome of the decision-making process, active outreach efforts to school and community decision-makers can be empowering and hope inducing. The alternative is to relegate ourselves

to feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and frustration. Which path will you choose? One can lead to paralysis and impotence, the other can lead to survival and indispensability.

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